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# THE AMERICAN NATURALIST.

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## SOME DEITIES AND DEMONS OF THE NAVAJOS.

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THE great dry-paintings of the Navajo priests, which I described in a previous number of this journal (October, 1885), illustrate, as I then explained, the visions of the prophets. But the prophets saw the gods in their visions, hence the paintings contain pictures of the gods with all their hieratic belongings. The characters which perform in the great dances conducted by the priests, are representatives of the gods. In the ancient creation-myth of the tribe some descriptions of the gods are incidentally given. In the later myths, recounting the acts of the prophets, more exact descriptions are to be found. It is from such material as this—these oral traditions, these paintings, these ceremonies, with their hundreds of songs and elaborate unchangeable rituals, handed down from generation to generation by word of mouth and by example only—that the student must evolve the nature and scope of their worship.

In one of the great ceremonies, that of the *Kledji Hathal*, or *Gaybecky*, there are, according to the circumstances, from twelve to sixteen different supernatural characters represented. Some of these, like the *gaybaäd*, being a numerous race of divine ones, are represented by many dancers—men masked, dressed and painted to represent gods, bearing sacred wands and talismans and symbolizing in every act and motion something in the lives of their prototypes; living and breathing idols to whom the suppliant prays and offers his sacrifices, well knowing that he addresses with reverent prayers only his own brother or uncle masquerading in the panoply of divinity.

They begin their cosmogony with an already existing world. It is a dim world; there is light, but as yet no sun, moon or stars. It is inhabited, however, by animals or animal gods with the gift of speech and other human attributes, and by some vague gods, probably meteorological personifications, possessing more of the human than the animal character. Just when mortal man first appears on the stage it is difficult or impossible to determine. True there is a first man and a first woman, as there seem to be in nearly all Indian myths; but they do not appear as the progenitors of the race. The time of their beginning is not told, they are coeval with the universe, and they still live in distant lands, but not in the nether world where dead Navajos go; in short, they are immortal and eternal—they are gods. Perhaps we have in them but an extension of the zoölatry of the Indian; as the lower animals have their ancient divine prototypes, so man must have his. With a strange suggestion of the existence of a primeval Darwin, we find in the legend the animals assuming more and more the human character, until the lower worlds which were once peopled only by flying animals are later inhabited by creatures who are spoken of as men. All the beings in the first world are able to fly away on wings from the rising waters of the flood; while in the third and fourth worlds they are obliged to seek protection in the hollow of a great reed, which grows as fast as the rising waters advance and bears the fugitives upward out of danger.

Arrived on this, the fifth, world, men increased and multiplied; but soon various enemies to the human race arose, demons and giants who devoured men, until after a while the race became nearly or quite extinct. Then came the great hero-god *Nagaynezgani*, to whom I will refer later, and killed the demons. After this, by special acts of creation, new men and women were made. Possibly the first of these creations is to be regarded as the first appearance of the true mortal Indian on the earth.

The Navajo has no faith in monogenesis, he believes in several special creations even for his own tribe. The process by which their rude gods made men in the old days was quite an elaborate one, and the Navajo shaman, in relating the myth, does full justice to all the difficulties. A full recital of all the symbolic mummeries that the divine beings thought it necessary to perform in this creative act, would be at best but tedious reading. A

brief sketch of their toils must suffice here. They took two ears of corn, one yellow and one white, the former was to become the female of the new couple and the latter the male, and it is in memory of this event, they say, that white corn is called male corn and yellow corn is called female corn to this day among the Navajos. The gods laid these ears on a large dish of pure turquoise, and covered them with embroidered blankets of different colors, and with sacred buckskins, *i. e.*, the skins of deer not slain by weapons but pursued to exhaustion and then smothered. They were laid with their points towards the east; but before they were laid down they were handed round from one god to another and each god turned them in a different direction, and this is the reason the Navajos to-day never dwell in one locality long, but wander from place to place.

From time to time the benevolent god *Has-chay'-el-thee* peeped under the covering to see how the incubation progressed, and when the ears of corn had assumed the shape of man, the wind-god entered under the blankets to give them life. He went in at the mouth and came out at the tips of the fingers. "Do you not believe this?" said an old shaman to me. "Look then at the tips of your fingers and there you will see *Niyol Bithin*, the trail of the wind." A double helical line is with the Navajos and other tribes a symbol of the whirlwind, and this symbol is impressed on the palmar aspect of the terminal joint of every human finger—satisfactory evidence to the Navajo philosopher that the wind-god, when he gave the breath of life to man, made his exit through the finger-tips. It was the gods of the white rock crystal, who live in Jemez mountain, that furnished these new beings with mind, and the goddess of the grasshoppers gave them voices. Then they rose, but at this moment a dark cloud descended from the heavens and covered them as a garment.

This pair became the ancestors of the *Tsedjinkini*, or people of the dark cliff house, the oldest gens of the present Navajo nation. The story tellers say that they are thus called because the ears of corn of which they were made were taken by the gods from certain dark cliffs. But the archæologists will be more inclined perhaps to think that the myth refers to some remnants of the ancient inhabitants of the cliff houses of Arizona, enslaved or otherwise adopted by the conquering Navajos. The myths contain several other accounts of the making of men, sometimes

the human forms are molded of moistened corn meal, while different ceremonies are performed and by different gods. But always Indian corn, in some form, is the substance used. As this has been from time immemorial the staple food of the Indian, it is not without reason that his gods have chosen it as the proper substance for making men. All Indian flesh is largely derived from maize.

It is a difficult task to determine which one of their gods is the most potent. Religion with them, as with many other peoples, reflects their own social conditions. Their government is a strict democracy. Chiefs are at best but elders, men of temporary and ill-defined influence, whom the youngest men in the tribe may contradict and defy. There is no highest chief of the tribe. Hence their gods, as their men, stand much on a level of equality. But, as you hear the myths recited, you gain the idea that at the present day the sun-god is the most potent, though very far from being omnipotent. In the earlier days of the world, and in the lower worlds, First-man and First-woman, the Coyote and the wind-gods, and, above all, the sea-monster, appear as personages of greater importance.

When the race came up from the fourth world to this, to escape the last flood, two very popular and much beloved persons were chosen to carry the sun and the moon, and all were deeply grieved when they departed for their distant homes beside the great eastern ocean. The sun-god dwells there now in a beautiful house built of turquoise. The sun is a bright shield which the god carries on his arm. The creation myth in one place describes with much exactness how he comes home after his day's work, how he hangs his shining shield on the wall, how it lights up the inside of the vast edifice, how it dangles and sways on the wall, going "tla, tla, tla" until at last the vibration stops and the noise ceases.

But, although they attribute great power to *Chohanoai*, the sun-god, it is not to him that they pray the most. It is not he who takes the greatest interest in human affairs and lends his ear most readily to human supplication. Is it because they naturally suppose the most active sympathy to dwell in the breast of a woman that they have found in a goddess their most beneficent deity? It may be so, but perhaps there are other reasons equally strong, which will presently appear, why *Estsánatlehi*, the goddess of the

west, is their most honored divinity. Various accounts are given of her origin. Some versions of the myth declare that she was found by First-man and First-woman; others add that they found her at the foot of a rainbow; but the version which I regard as the most ancient and purest gives an elaborate account of a special creation, by the gods, of two divine women, one of whom was made of a piece of blue turquoise and the other of a piece of white shell, precious substances highly valued among the Navajos. The former, she of the turquoise, was *Estsanatlehi*, the latter, called her sister, was *Yolkai-estsan*, or White-Shell Woman, who figures as a less important character in the myths. This *Estsanatlehi* afterwards became the wife of the sun-god, who like a true savage god is a polygamist. He has a wife in the east and another in the west; but *Estsanatlehi*, the goddess of the west, is beloved. She embodies attributes of various queens of heaven, of various wives of the highest deities which appear in a hundred mythologies. She has, however, none of the low jealousy and petty spite of her sister Juno; she reminds one more of the Scandinavian Frigga. If one's opinions of the Indian is based on the popular accounts of their excessive cruelty, he will marvel that such an embodiment of benevolence can have a place in their mythology. If his estimate of the social status of the Indian woman is the one most common in current literature—for she is usually represented as the over-worked slave of a pitiless master—he will marvel that to a female should be assigned such a high place among the gods. But an intimate observance of this people demonstrates that she may fairly represent the Navajo matron at her best.

The name *Estsanatlehi* signifies the woman who changes or rejuvenates, and it is said of her that she never remains in one state, but that she grows to be an old woman, and in the course of time, at will, she becomes a young girl again, and so passes on through an endless cycle of lives, changing but never dying. In the light of this narration we see her as none other than our own Mother Nature, the goddess of the changing year, with its youth of spring, its middle age of summer, its senility of autumn, growing old only to become young again. The deity of fruitful nature is, it will be admitted, fitly a goddess, and fitly also the wife of the sun, to whose potent influence she owes her fertility. Our Aryan forefathers never conceived a more consistent myth

than this. But why is she the goddess of the west? Let it be remembered that the Navajo land lies to the west of the continental divide, and slopes toward the setting sun. The Pacific, not the Atlantic, is the reservoir from which it draws its scanty moisture. From the west, not from the east, come the storm-clouds of the summer and the soft thawing breezes of the spring. Hence naturally this beneficent goddess, who loves her Navajo children so well, dwells in the western ocean, and from there dispenses her bounty. While she still lived in the Navajo land, and long before she journeyed to the west, she was blessed with a child whose father was the sun, at the same time her sister bore a child whose father was a water-fall, or, as some versions make it, a rain-storm. These boys were *Nagaynezgani* and *Thóbadjischeni*. One version of the myth says they were both children of *Estsanatlehi* and the sun. They are called brothers throughout the myth; but according to the Indian system of relationship their mothers being sisters constitutes them brethren as well if they were children of one mother.

These are the sacred brothers, the Dioscuri, who figure in the myths and legends of so many races not only of this continent but of the old world as well. Comparative mythologists usually regard the sacred brothers as myths of night and day, of light and darkness. Max Müller regards this as the proper interpretation of the Asvinau of India, but Mr. Talboys Wheeler, in his *History of India*, says they are "apparently a personification of light and moisture," and this I believe to be the true explanation of the Navajo myth, for the name *Thobajischeni* signifies Kinsman of the Waters, and the portion of the myth which refers to his paternity strengthens this theory.

Both of the brothers receive homage as gods of battle, but *Nagaynezgani* is regarded as the more potent of the two. It is to these that men offer their sacrifices and prayers when they are about to go on the war-path. The sacrifices may be offered anywhere, but their special shrine is at *Tho-yet'-li*, a place at the junction of two rivers in the valley of the San Juan, somewhere in what is now the Territory of Utah. Hither it is said they went to dwell when their mission on this earth was done, when they had slain all the more powerful demons and left man with no worse enemy in the world than his own kind. Here it is said they still dwell, and here their reflection is still to be seen on the

waters of the San Juan river. This part of the myth doubtless refers to some natural phenomenon observable at this point, but I know not what it is, for I have never visited *Thoyetli*. If the Navajo would have special fortune in some war, he must make a pilgrimage to the far *Thoyetli* and lay there the sacred cigarettes for the gods to smoke.

*Nagaynezgani* is distinctly an Indian war-god, and the god of an especially shrewd and crafty tribe even among Indians. Like Thor he is the terror of evil spirits, but unlike Thor the evil spirits never outwit him. He too has the thunder-bolts for weapons, but he has not an unlimited supply of them. He must husband them, even as the Indian husbands his well-made arrows. His chief weapon is a great stone knife; but he depends not so much on his weapons as on his presence of mind, his craftiness, his powers of dissimulation and, above all, on his "medicine." He is no coward, no vacillator, once sped on his journey he never returns unsuccessful; but in accomplishing his purpose he exhibits more the character of the cunning Ulysses than of the bold Hercules.

It is not, however, the warriors alone who pray to him, he is appealed to by all classes of suppliants as well, and there are songs in his honor in all the rituals that I have yet learned. Here is one of the songs taken from the great rite of the *Zilyidji Hathal* or Mountain Chant. It is a literal translation. I have only chosen such English forms and phrases as would represent, to some extent, the excellent rhythm of the original Navajo song, which is a monologue on the part of the god:

I am the slayer of the alien gods,  
I walk afar;  
From out the hole that passes through the sky,  
I walk afar;  
My enemies assail me, but in vain,  
I walk afar;  
My foes of all sorts stand in fear of me,  
I walk afar;  
I go on errands of a dangerous kind,  
I walk afar;  
Upon the highest of the mountain peaks,  
I walk afar.

In the Navajo language all not of their own or cognate tribe are called *ana*, or *na*, *i. e.*, foreigners or aliens. The minor gods or genii are called *jay* or *gay*. Hence *anagay*, or alien gods, is



a term applied to all those supernatural beings who once devoured and harassed mankind. *Nezga* means to kill by violence, to slay, and thus we have *Nagaynezgani*, Slayer of the Alien Gods, a name which has its very close analogue in that of Jack the Giant Killer. His mission in life was to destroy these alien gods, which he did with a few exceptions, notable among which were the gods of cold, hunger and old age. These creatures pleaded so well for their lives, and demonstrated so well to the hero that they were not unmixed evils, that they were spared to still torment man. As a specimen of the Navajo way of reasoning, I will relate his adventure with *Sakaz'-estsan'*, the Cold-woman :

When he returned from his adventure with Old-age, he said to his mother, "Tell me where the Cold-woman dwells," she did not answer him ; four times he repeated the question, when she replied, "You have done enough, my son. Seek to slay no more." But the wind-god whispered in his ear, "She dwells on the summit of *Depentsa*" (the San Juan mountains). So he set forth and traveled to the north and wandered around over the highest peaks of the mountains until he, at length, encountered a wrinkled old woman sitting nearly naked on a bed of snow. She had neither food, fire nor shelter, her eyes streamed tears, she shivered constantly and her teeth chattered so that she could scarcely talk. He knew at once that she was *Sakaz-estsan*. A vast crowd of snow-buntings flitted around her. These were the couriers whom she was accustomed to send forth to announce the coming of storms. They were the spies who told her what was going on in the outer world. As he approached her he said, "I have come on a cruel errand. I have come to kill you that man may suffer no more torture from you, or die at your hands." "You may kill me if you will," she chattered, "but man will be worse off when I am dead than he is now; for when I die it will be always hot, and the land will dry up, and the springs will cease to flow, and men will die of heat and thirst. You will do better if you let me live." So he lowered the arm he had raised to kill her, and reflected a moment. "Grandmother, you speak the truth," he said at last ; "you shall live," and he returned to his mother's dwelling without a trophy.

His journeys in which he failed to listen to the voice of mercy are, however, much more numerous than those in which he re-

lented, and, had I space to relate them, the reader would hear of many myths with which he is already familiar in tales of our own antiquity and in the folk-lore of modern Europeans. Many characters with whom he has become acquainted in the pages of Grimm he would meet again, but dressed in buckskin and disguised in paint and feathers.

The ancestral prairie wolf, the apotheosized coyote, is an important figure in their mythology, as he is in the mythologies of all our aborigines to whom the coyote was known, and in their earlier fabulous ages, particularly when the Navajos dwelt in the lower worlds, he was a potent god. Closely allied to the fox in nature, he has so many mythic similarities to the reynard of European folk-lore, that we can not but suspect that our own distant ancestors once worshiped the fox-god. In Arizona, as in Europe, he always appears as a cunning, deceitful mischief-maker.

It was the Coyote who brought about the expulsion of the people from the lower world. He stole the young of *Tiëholtsođi*, the sea-monster, and the latter in revenge, or in order to rescue the lost ones, caused the great floods which drove all up to the surface of this earth. It is Coyote who is responsible for the present irregular position of the stars. He usually had the laugh on his side as the result of his trickeries, but he was not always so fortunate.

Once he went out hunting with his father-in-law, and they rested at night on the top of a rugged mountain where they lit their camp-fire and cooked some meat for supper. As they were lying down to sleep Coyote said to his companion, "This hill is called the Hill of the Burned Moccasins." As the old man had never heard of this extraordinary name before, he could not help wondering at it until the wind-god whispered in his ear, "Change your moccasins;" so before he fell asleep he took the Coyote's moccasins and put them under his own head, while he put his moccasins in place of the Coyote's. Late in the night the Coyote rose softly, took the moccasins from under the old man's head and buried them in the hot embers. When they woke in the morning the old man pretended to look in vain for his lost moccasins, "Ah!" said Coyote, "You have forgotten that this is the Hill of the Burned Moccasins." "Oh! there they are under your head," said the elder; "I thank you, my son-in-law, for

taking such good care of them." "Yes," said Coyote, "I have taken care of them for you; but the ground is so nice and soft on this mountain I think I shall prefer to go barefoot to-day."

Not only is the prairie-wolf a god, but nearly every animal in the Navajo land has its own apotheosized prototype, its generic ancestral god. All of these gods have their special place in the mythology of this people. Many of them have to this day special sacrifices proper to them which are prepared in the medicine-lodge and offered according to established ritual. The Navajos then are zoölaters; that is, in common with all the still pagan aboriginal races of our continent, they worship the lower animals; or perhaps it would be more proper to say they worship zoö-morphic gods. A degraded form of worship no doubt many of my readers deem it; but it should be remembered that zoölatry was common to all the races of antiquity, and that a marked remnant of it is our own heritage to this day.

Besides all these gods, the Navajos have a host of local divinities so numerous that I never hope to get a complete list of them. The Navajo land is, or was, bounded by four great mountains, Jemez on the east, San Mateo on the south, San Francisco on the west and San Juan on the north. The resident deities of these great peaks seem to receive more honor than any other place-gods, but the presiding genii of other mountains, rocks and cañons are not neglected by the devout. No people are more ingenious than our American aborigines in framing fanciful stories of locality. The Navajos particularly delight in this form of myth. Their land abounds in strange geologic formations, in rocks fancifully sculptured by the elements, and it abounds equally in myths accounting for these features.

Some recent writers have stated that our American Indians as a rule offer prayer and sacrifice only to evil spirits, believing that time is wasted in endeavoring to gain the favor of beings who are always benevolent. Among the Navajos, at least, I can venture to assert that such is not the case. The gods seem to receive worship in proportion to their reputation for good-will towards men. Indeed, according to the Navajo's mythology, the evil gods have nearly all been destroyed, and his worst conceptions of malevolence are altogether things of the past.